

Focus on a Federation Member: The May Museum & Park

By Deborah Higgins, Director, May Museum

When Tabitha Marie DeVisconti died on July 20, 1983, she left her family home to the Town of Farmville, along with funds to repair the house and landscape the grounds—such was the birth of the May Museum & Park. The property was officially opened as a museum on September 29, 1991, after years of sorting through “Miss Tabitha’s” accumulations of a lifetime and an almost total reconstruction of the house. That initial process resulted in thousands of pages of inventory, hundreds of boxes of artifacts—many of which have not seen the light of day since that time—and a museum showcasing appropriately labeled items in display cases throughout its rooms.

Miss Tabitha was the great-great-granddaughter of Major Benjamin May, who settled in Pitt County before the Revolutionary War and who was instrumental in the early government of North Carolina and Pitt County. He was a Pitt County delegate to the Provincial Congress at Halifax when they passed the Halifax Resolves on April 12, 1776, which authorized the N.C. delegates in the Continental Congress to vote for independence from Great Britain. Benjamin May was one of five Pitt County delegates to the Provincial Congress when the constitution of N.C. was adopted on December 18, 1776. He served as a major in the Pitt County militia during the Revolutionary War and later represented Pitt County in the NC House of Commons until his death in 1808.

Major Benjamin May’s grandson, James Williams May, along with

his wife, Tabitha Bynum May, built the house that became the May Museum in about 1854; the exact date is not confirmable, but it is known to have been in existence before the Civil War. In addition to the 1.5-story Greek Revival main house, there is a detached two-room kitchen which pre-dates the house itself. The story is told that this kitchen building was rolled on logs and pulled by mules from the May home place approximately 1.5 miles west of its present location. James and Tabitha had 4 children who lived past childhood, two sons and two daughters. The youngest of those children, Amy Adeline Gertrude May (called Addie), married Lorenzo DeVisconti in Texas in 1890, and Miss Tabitha was born there in December of 1891. Although the family moved back to Farmville before her first birthday, Miss Tabitha did not move back into her grandfather’s old house until 1931, but she lived there the rest of her life.

About 15 years after the May Museum & Park opened, it had fallen on difficult times, as is typical for small museums throughout the world. Although Miss Tabitha had provided a trust fund for ongoing maintenance of the museum and artifacts, the initial funds to rehab the property had been depleted, and the Town of Farmville simply did not have the ability to maintain the May Museum on its own. At the end of 2006, the Friends of the May Museum was incorporated, and new life was breathed into the old house. Additional renovation work was done on the structure, including



Enjoy the beautiful 2-acre setting of the May Museum & Park; tour the ca. 1854 Greek Revival main house; and visit the detached kitchen, pictured here in the background.

the existing metal roof; conservation work was begun on the extensive quilt collection (more about that later); and the museum was converted to a house museum, reflecting life in Farmville around the turn of the 20th century (1890s to 1900s). The two main rooms of the first floor are furnished as a typical Victorian parlor and bedroom, and although there are a few items of furniture original to the house, most of the furnishings are donated or on loan from local residents.

Miss Tabitha was only a young girl at the turn of the 20th century, and it is not known where she was living in Farmville. Her mother, Addie, died in late 1901, when Miss Tabitha was only 9, and she lived with her mother’s only sister, Sue Albritton, until the aunt’s death in 1908. From 1913 to 1914, she attended the Richmond School for Women in Richmond, VA. From that point on, Miss Tabitha was active in all civic activities in Farmville, including being one of the founding members of the Benjamin May Chapter of the DAR, being a charter member of the Farmville Garden Club,

MEMBER NEWS

Focus on a Federation Member: The May Museum (continued)

starting a bird club for young people in Farmville, and being a member and leader of the Farmville Woman's Club, the Literary Club, Queen Anne Chapter of the Daughters of the American Colonies, State Camellia Society, Pitt County Camellia Society, and the Pitt County Historical Society. In addition, during World War II, Miss Tabitha operated a social center for servicemen. She was a dedicated worker for the American Red Cross, Home Service, and Bloodmobile; the TB Association, and Easter Seals, as well as starting the first library in Farmville and being its librarian for seven years.

I think it is safe to say that Miss Tabitha was a "pack rat"—she saved everything. There are photos of the house during the renovation process after her death that show stacks of newspapers, boxes, etc. in every room. The weeding out and cataloguing could not have been easy—but what a treasure hunt! The May Museum is fortunate to have all of these artifacts just waiting for re-discovery—we can present exhibits based solely on our artifacts for years to come. One of the most important group of things Miss Tabitha saved was the family quilts. We now have over 40 quilts in our collection, but almost one-third of those are quilts produced by the May family. We believe this is one of the largest, intact collections of quilts produced by one family in North Carolina. There are 12 quilts that are documented to have been made by Tabitha Bynum May (Miss Tabitha's grandmother), Addie May (Miss Tabitha's mother), Sue May Hill Albritton (Miss Tabitha's aunt), or Sue May De-

Visconti Sheppard (Miss Tabitha's younger sister). While conservation and preservation are a continuing issue with any textiles, these quilts are on display at the museum. Efforts are currently underway to completely assess each quilt to determine correct conservation and storage needs.

Another collection saved by Miss Tabitha is the 51 prints of North Carolina landmarks by Louis Orr, who was commissioned by Robert Lee Humber from Greenville to make etchings of those landmarks between 1939 and 1952. The prints were originally sold in portfolios of 5 for \$50 per set, and Miss Tabitha had collected all of them. Unfortunately, as sometimes happens in museums, three of those prints disappeared at some point before framing; happily, we have been able to replace all but one—we are still missing the print of Tryon Palace in New Bern. I like to say you can visit all of North Carolina just by visiting my office in the May Museum—where I am lucky enough to be able to enjoy these prints every day.

Our current exhibit, *Miss Tabitha's Closet: Clothing from the May Museum Collection*, opened May 4 and will remain through the end of November. It features items from a bygone era—white lawn dresses, beautifully fashioned petticoats with rows of pleats and hand-made lace, bonnets and hats, gloves, evening bags, silk stockings with seams, corsets, button shoes—as well as hand-made doll clothes and over a dozen exquisite baby bonnets. You will see what it meant to be fashionable a century ago—and it will

make you happy to live in the present, much less formal times.

The May Museum sits on a 2-plus acre site of mature trees, manicured lawn, and lush beds filled with native flowers and shrubs. Just having celebrated its one-year anniversary is the Susan Howard Wyre Cable Memorial Garden—a circular herb and flower garden centered around a bird bath and flanked on the north and south by benches donated by the Farmville Home and Lawn Garden Club and providing a perfect site from which to enjoy the "park" portion of our facility. There is a rear porch—complete with rockers to while away the afternoon while enjoying the cool breeze—and walkway connecting the kitchen to the main house. Come visit us and see how pleasant life was in Farmville 100 years ago, and how pleasant it still is!

Visitor Information

The May Museum & Park is located at 3802 S. Main Street in Farmville and is open Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and other hours by appointment. Call Deb Higgins at (252) 753-6375 or (252) 327-8859 for information or to schedule a tour, or contact her at dhiggins@farmville-nc.com.